



Book Review

Gengshen, H. (2020). *Eco-translatology: Towards an eco-paradigm of translation studies*. Springer. ISBN: 978-981-15-2260-4

Ningyang Chen
Soochow University, China
nychen@suda.edu.cn

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The thriving of ecology as “a new integrative discipline” (Odum, 1977) has cross-pollinated across physical and human sciences, giving birth to a line of emerging fields of study, such as eco-economics, ecocriticism, and eco-anthropology. On the face of it, Hu Gengshen’s *Eco-translatology* may look to be another trendy amalgamation, yet its lofty goal, as stated in the book’s subtitle and the author’s preferred abbreviation of the book title as “*Eco-paradigm*” (p. 1), is more ambitious than simply following the trend. It aims at ushering a paradigm shift – laying “a milestone” (Springer, n.d.) for the translation scholarship of today. In this regard, the book creates just the right impression: there is no shortage of confident arguments derived from the author’s years-long commitment to cultivating and promoting this proposed approach. His attachment to the subject is hinted at in the book’s unique dedication, where three honourees are bullet-listed that share the ‘family name’ of “Eco-translatology” (p. xv-xvi). With proud sentiments permeating the pages, the book sends a strong message that full credit should be given to the author for initiating a locally-inspired theory that is now going global.

The book consists of eight chapters. The first three chapters lay the foundation of the eco-translatology theory: Chapter 1 defines its “name and nature;” Chapter 2 charts its “inception and development;” Chapter 3 elaborates its “research foci and theoretical tenets”. Chapters 4 to 6 break down the theory into three threads, i.e., the macro, meso, and microlevels, and examine aspects of the theory within each level. This explanation of the theoretical construct is followed by its practical applications illustrated with exemplar studies in Chapter 7. The closing chapter winds up the book with implications and a roadmap for future work.

In Chapter 1, the author revisits the key concepts of ‘translatology’ and ‘ecology’ and explains how the two have been brought together to foster a distinctive perspective. This review is given in a historical context where insights from the West have shaped China’s domestic translation studies, with seminal works by James Holmes, Gideon Toury, Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere exerting a lasting influence on scholarly undertakings. Meanwhile, he acknowledges the ground-laying work by domestic precursors who have contributed to the understanding and acceptance of translation as a subject of study. A niche for innovation is thus created by capitalising on the integrative potential of ecology as a “metascience” (p. 26) and feeding it to the study of translation. The author suggests that marriage between the two disciplines is

expected because they share several similarities. In particular, both target a complex, changing environment with multiple factors that contribute to the evolution and change of the system and encourage inclusive and cross-disciplinary approaches.

Chapter 2 recounts the history of eco-translatology. Here, the author introduces a series of complicated ideas as the foundation for this cross-disciplinary approach and shapes a theoretical framework to guide the practical studies in the subsequent chapters. At the centre is a trilogy of “the Sequence Chain”, “the homo analogy between translational ecology and natural ecology”, and “a systematic investigation into Translation as Adaptation and Selection” (p. 27). These baffling coinages can be more easily understood if reconstructed by some accessible ideas in Chinese philosophy and Darwinian belief. In particular, the “Sequence Chain” creates a link between translation and nature, a long bow that is mediated by language, culture, and human society (p. 29). Far-fetched as it seems, this link serves as the basis for the analogy between “translational ecology” and “natural ecology”, a parallel that builds itself on the Chinese philosophy of “the oneness of man and nature” and supplies the foundation of eco-translatology. The third idea in the trilogy draws from the evolutionary mechanisms of natural selection and adaptation to reconceptualise translation as multiple choice-making processes that aim to adapt to the new ecology in the target sociocultural system and strive to balance all factors that may influence the practice. Taking complete account of these processes and factors serves as the *modus operandi* of eco-translatological studies.

In Chapter 3, Hu focuses on the development of eco-translatology over the recent decade and specifies the sources of its growth, including the addition, removal, and modification of central arguments and views. With some overlapping descriptions of “translational ecology” in the preceding chapter, this chapter highlights the notion of “oriental eco-wisdom” (p. 53), which has inspired the innovative alternative to the mainstream Western translation theories. This so-termed “eco-wisdom” is derived from the holistic and integrative approach prevalent in the discussion of Chinese philosophy, theology, traditional medicine, and beyond (Slingerland, 2018). By viewing translation from a holistic perspective, the author argues that the ultimate goal of translation is to pursue harmony and coordination between elements and that achieving this requires selection and adaptation at all levels. At the textual level, the translator needs to make proper choices in the textual environment to accommodate the expectations of the intended audience. At the non-textual level, the other stakeholders in the translation enterprise need to coordinate to maximise the adaptability of the translated work by making proper selections. Thus, the “eco-wisdom” guides researchers to assess a range of elements, among which key notions such as environment, source and target texts, and translator acts are foregrounded.

A more detailed description of the eco-translatology approach is provided in the subsequent three chapters, each addressing a specific level of a tripartite interpretative model. Chapter 4 addresses the macrolevel, which tackles the inherent complexity and cross-disciplinary nature of translation studies and breaks the bulk of the ecosystem into sub-systems of management, market, education, and translation proper. The coordination and balance between sub-ecosystems are analysed using the theoretical arguments in the preceding chapters. The mesolevel is the focus of Chapter 5. The author revisits the definition of translation and translator, the practice and motivation of translation through the lens of eco-translatology, introducing a host of new concepts to accord with the ecological theme. Chapter 6 illustrates the operation of eco-translation at the microlevel. The author uses real-world examples such as the translation of public signs to demonstrate how specific decisions ought to be

made based on a set of rules of adaptation and selection. Interestingly yet confusingly, the author raises the possibility of “‘emptying’ the translator’s mind” (p. 191) as preparation for gauging the textual environment and suggests theory-informed strategies to mediate text production effectively.

In Chapter 7, the author provides a long list of model studies on an extended scope of practices, covering the translation of a mixture of genres (e.g., literary works, philosophical and sociological literature, sci-tech/commercial/legal documents), interpreting, translator training, and cyber-translation. Apart from text-based analysis, the author also illustrates how the eco-approach can inform theoretical discussion (e.g., translation history, criticism, methodology, ethics). In addition, some reflections are included on more general issues of translatability, retranslation, translation strategies and styles, as well as “turns” in translation studies. This list is followed by Chapter 8, where the author paints a revolutionary blueprint and foresees trends in research practice.

Overall, this book can be appreciated as a comprehensive overview of a locally-inspired theoretical contribution: “a unique and independent Chinese theory in Translation Studies” (Dollerup, 2010, p. 1). As proclaimed in the book, such a novel perspective has the potential to complement, challenge, or even subvert some of the dominant “memes” (Chesterman, 2016) in mainstream Western theories by casting a new light on such dualistic notions as literal vs. free and domestication vs. foreignisation. However, there might be a risk in overemphasising the theory’s distinctive ‘Chineseness’, for its magnified uniqueness could hinder its developing relationship with other systems. One typical example is the “oriental eco-wisdom” (p. 53) which is professed to find no parallel in the Western context. Admittedly, the ‘oriental’ perspective as presented in the book differs from the ecologically inspired theories in the English scholarship mainly in that it treats “ecology” in a more abstract and metaphorical sense. While emerging fields such as ecolinguistics focus on human engagement with the natural environment (Stibbe, 2020), the ‘oriental’ approach extends the notion of “ecology” to encompass both the textual environment and the environment in which the text is produced. By subjecting the dialectic of discourse and context to the monistic view in traditional Chinese philosophy, the ‘oriental’ approach intends to address translation in its broadest sense, taking into account all the parties involved and all the factors that matter. The validity and practicability of such treatment remain to be testified, yet this conceptual difference alone can hardly warrant its significance as “a totally novel, or ‘formally nonexistent,’ perspective” (p. 47). In a broad sense, there seems to be non-trivial common ground between the ‘oriental’ view of “interrelationships and interplay of the elements in the entire translational ecosystem” (p. 258) and such Western understandings of ecology as “the relationships between all the various organisms and their physical environment” (van Lier, 2002, p. 144). And even in discussions of ecology as natural science, the holistic idea is never missing (Odum, 1977).

Apart from the understated possible connections, the book’s exclusive ‘Chineseness’ is also evident in its ‘translationese’ style, making it a challenge to read, especially for the target English readers. For example, there are many cases where the text needs to be ‘back-translated’ into Chinese to make sense (more on a rhetorical level). Consider the definition of the term ‘eco-translatology’ – “a paradigm of ecological translation studies rooted in eco-reason and synthesised from an ecological perspective” (p. 7). Some sweeping arguments serve only to diminish the strength and rigour of the English writing, although they may be deemed by some as forceful in Chinese prose. The following is an example: “Because all truths are not without limitations and relativity, all scientific fields are always in progress and all concepts need to be updated, the course on which people pursue truth has no bounds. Therefore,

based on the law of development, Eco-translatology will be gradually exposed to its own weakness during the course of development” (p. 288).

As a home-grown researcher in China, I was introduced to the eco-translatology approach years ago when there was a tendency for the localised term ‘paradigm’ to be overused or abused as a catchword in Chinese academic discourse. Compared with the relatively short-lived ideas put forward to claim to change the course of the discipline, Hu’s theoretical contributions seem to have stood the test of time, receiving respectable attention over the last decade (p. 51) and generating rich research findings. These are, unsurprisingly, from studies conducted mainly by domestic researchers working on topics of local relevance (e.g., Ma, 2014). While a couple of studies had been reported in English-language journal articles, the majority were Chinese-language publications. Therefore, for the initiative to realise its full potential of disseminating “Chinese translation theory” (p. 129), more work is needed to expand its influence beyond the local context. The publication of *Eco-translatology* is just one step towards this direction. However, as indicated above, the author’s endeavour towards tearing down the linguistic barrier generally falls short in communicating the meaning and significance of his ideas. One possible explanation is that refashioning a scholarly work with a foreign language calls for ‘translation’ at a deeper level. Thus, for their voices to reach a wider audience, domestic authors writing or ‘translating’ for international publication may need to make more radical changes to negotiate the gap in genre characteristics, rhetorical traditions, and even thought patterns that underlie the language-specific encoding of ideas. Or, to put it in eco-translatological terms, it is pertinent for prospective bilingual authors to make strategic choices – linguistic or otherwise – to adapt their work to the new ecology of the target system.

On the whole, readers may find it difficult to be convinced of an eco-translatology paradigm in the end despite the struggles they may have experienced to decipher the book. These challenges would lead to reflections on more fundamental issues concerning translation studies with interest beyond the Chinese case, including disciplinary identity, ownership of theories, and communicative reach of language and knowledge systems. For translation scholars and practitioners, there arises a pressing need to understand and practise the ‘translation’ of ideas, which may open new avenues of research into the writing and translation of scholarly texts. In this regard, *Eco-translatology* exemplifies a needed and admirable attempt to increase the visibility of peripheral scholarship in translation studies. It provokes us to reconsider our experiences of doing and writing about translation as sources of inspiration for meaningful and effective communication between disciplines, languages, and cultures.

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